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**OPEN THE CONVERSATION**

Take some time to build relationships with the students:

* Ask for each student’s high and low from the week.
* Today’s RBQ (Relationship Building Question): If you could grow anything (ex. money off trees, pizza out of the ground) what would you grow?

**INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever tried to grow something? Maybe a plant, or even a garden? You know how important the soil is, right? It needs to be the right kind, have enough nutrients, and be well-draining. If the soil isn’t good, the plant won’t thrive. Well, in our spiritual lives, there’s something similar called “spiritual soil.” It’s what helps us grow closer to God. Just like a plant needs good soil to grow strong and healthy, we need good spiritual soil to flourish in our relationship with God. Today, we’re going to learn about a story Jesus told to teach us about this spiritual soil. It’s a parable, or a story Jesus uses to teach us something. The story uses the image of a farmer planting seeds in different kinds of soil to show us how different people respond to God’s word.

**Have you ever tried growing anything? Did it survive? Is there something you want to try to grow? Do you think you will be able to keep it alive?**

***READ MATTHEW 13***

*It may be helpful to take the sections in chunks as outlined by the verses at beginning of questions.*

1. **[13:1-9]****What does each soil represent?** *After having a student describe each soil, have students silently consider which soil they are planted in.*
2. **[13:10-17]** **How would you describe a “calloused” heart? How would you describe an open heart?**
3. **How can you keep an open heart and excitement in your faith?**
4. **[13:18-23] Why are all people’s hearts bad soil apart from God’s work in our lives?**
5. **How can you prepare the soil of your heart for God to work in your life? Why is it important to always check your heart to see how you are doing with God?**
6. **How can you share the gospel with another person by sharing the parable of the sower this week?**

**WRAP UP**

**Put today's lesson into action: How can you apply it to your life?**  
*Ask for any prayer requests, and pray for one another.*

**EXTENDED CUT**

Crowds gathered around Jesus and He took the opportunity to teach them many things. As the people stood along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus got into a boat and spoke to them. This would have given Him the necessary distance so more people could see and hear what He had to say. Matthew said Jesus taught the people many things through parables. A parable is a story with a spiritual point; it has been said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Using agricultural imagery, Jesus described a farmer sowing seeds. This was a natural and familiar custom of the day that most in the crowd could relate to. Seed was scattered across the ground and then plowed into the soil. As Jesus spoke, listeners could picture the image His words painted in their minds. But this was not just a story about agriculture, in this story, the seed was the message of the gospel. Jesus spoke of a farmer who sowed the seed and then He described the different types of ground or soil the seed fell onto. Anyone who has ever planted knows the type of soil you put the seed into matters a great deal. Those in the crowd that day would have also identified with this aspect of the parable. The first type of soil was along the path where people walked. This soil would have been trampled down and hardened. The seed that landed there would have served as bird food more than plant life. Next, He described rocky ground with a thin layer of soil covering a stony foundation. Seed that fell there might sprout up quickly but wouldn’t take root due to the rock layer underneath the shallow bed of soil. The last two types of soil described were among thorns and then, finally, good soil. The seed thrown among the thorns never had a chance to grow because it was choked out by the waiting thorns. The good soil represents the type of ground that receives seed rightly and grows a productive crop. As He finished his parable, Jesus made the call for those with ears to hear to listen carefully. Jesus was telling them an important spiritual truth.

**What does each soil represent? *After having a student describe each soil, have students silently consider which soil they are planted in.***

As the disciples were among the crowd that day listening to the parable of the sower, they had questions about Jesus’s method of teaching. Pulling Jesus aside, they asked why He was using parables instead of speaking the truth plainly. Although the story Jesus told was easy to picture in the hearers’ context, the spiritual application may not be easily discerned. Why was Jesus speaking in this manner? Jesus explained His motivation behind the parable. The reception of the audience served to further emphasize the point of the parable. The disciples and those who were spiritually sensitive had understanding due to soft hearts and open ears. But those with hearts that were closed would not receive the message, just as the bad soil would not receive the seed. Those that are open to spiritual things will receive truth that grows their faith and ministers to their hearts while those who are hardened to the gospel message will hear the story but not receive the true meaning. We are reminded through this passage that it is God who opens eyes and ears to receive the truth of the gospel. As His messengers, we are responsible for obediently taking His Word to others, but we cannot force anyone to genuinely believe. Jesus quoted words written in Isaiah 6 that the hardened would hear but not listen and see but remain blind. He described the people’s hearts as having grown dull. This describes those who are hardened to the truth of the Word of God to their lives. This is a plague on the American church today and one Christ followers must guard against. Jesus said the disciples were blessed because they were able to understand His message. All who are spiritually sensitive to the gospel are blessed. Not only do they gain the benefit of new understanding and spiritual growth, but they also enjoy fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Spiritual Truth is meant to continually transform us into the image of our Savior through understanding and application.

**How would you describe a “calloused” heart? How would you describe an open heart?**

Let's be real, sometimes words slip out of our mouths without us even knowing what they mean. Sometimes we even use the same word to mean different things depending on the situation. Take the word "faith," for instance. We throw it around all the time, but do we really know what it means? We might say someone "lost their faith," implying they abandoned their beliefs. Or we might suggest taking a "leap of faith," which sounds like a blindfolded trust fall. Heck, some folks even talk about “claiming the promises of God by faith,” which suggest faith as a way to get God to do their bidding. But when it comes to the Bible, the definition of faith is crystal clear. According to David Dockery, it's all about committing your whole self to Jesus - mind, heart, and obedience. It's not just a mental or emotional response, but a complete inward transformation that's confirmed by the Holy Spirit. At the end of the day, faith isn't something you can earn or fake, but a response to God's grace that brings about surrender and freedom from sin.

**How can you keep an open heart and excitement in your faith?**

Jesus then explained the parable and how the types of soils represent different ways that the gospel is received. Three of the types of soil don’t receive the message but the last one does, resulting in a great harvest. One of the main applications of this parable is to assess which type of soil best reflects the state of our own hearts. The first type Jesus mentioned is the soil along the path—hard and unwelcome ground, representing those who are closed to the gospel. These people may be antagonistic and resistant toward Jesus or simply indifferent. People with this type of heart reject the gospel directly.

**Why are all people’s hearts bad soil apart from God’s work in our lives?**

The next type of soil receives the gospel initially and even with excitement, but never develops deep spiritual roots. When opposition arises, the seed shrivels in the elements. These hearts may appear to believe for a while but when testing or suffering comes, they ultimately fall away. Even though these individuals may start well, eventually the cares of the world and the anxiety and stress of life overwhelm and overcome them. Thirdly, some hearts and soil receive the gospel message at first. They are interested and maybe even invested for a time, but eventually thorns choke the apparent life in this soil. Whatever form the thorns take in these individuals’ lives, they ultimately gain greater power than the message that has been received. Finally, we see the good soil which represents hearts that are receptive and ready for the message. This is fertile ground for things of the Lord to survive and even thrive. Jesus said that this type of heart will reap an abundant harvest that bears fruit in any circumstance. This is the goal of following Jesus. As you consider the four types of soil, it is important to note that the same seed was scattered on each. The farmer didn’t pick and choose which soil to throw the seed on, he scattered freely, but the reception varied. Most likely, we see bits and pieces of our own hearts in each of the different types of soil, and we benefit from evaluating this regularly. Ultimately, those who belong to Jesus will receive His message and product a harvest over time. And God is the one who brings the harvest as we receive His truth and live according to it.

**How can you prepare the soil of your heart for God to work in your life? Why is it important to always check your heart to see how you are doing with God?**

Jesus’s words challenge us to consider the state of the soil of our hearts. A farmer works the ground preparing the soil throughout the year in preparation for planting and then eventually the harvest. We should also take our own spiritual cultivation as seriously and intentionally. God is the one who brings about the harvest, but we are also responsible for evaluating the soil of our own hearts, seeking that the seeds of spiritual things can take root, grow deep, and produce fruit in our lives. We cultivate the soil of our hearts by plowing up and removing rocks of ungodly thoughts and attitudes. We pull up any roots of bitterness or unforgiveness that try to sprout. We stay on guard against weeds of sin that need to be removed and we fertilize our soil by receiving the Word daily and applying it to our lives.

**How can you share the gospel with another person by sharing the parable of the sower this week?**